

SECRET STRINGS

By Kate Jordan

(Mrs. F. M. Vermilye)

YOUR Madeira has witchery in it, Jack, my cigar is just right, and I like that sound of rain on the glass—it shuts us in.

All such things touch secret strings
For heavy hearts to hear.

So Rosetti said, and he ought to know. Well, old man, I am disposed to let the strings vibrate, and tell you all about it.

Where did I see her first? That is, indeed, a man's question. A woman, I fancy, would have asked, What is she like?

Well, four years ago, one of those soft, wet mornings full of a tempering haze which visit Paris just as Winter melts into Spring, found me strolling along the Boulevard Sebastopol. It was Sunday, and I had gone to that *bourgeois* quarter to see the common people on their day of rest. There are times when the common people are interesting; they wear their emotions on the outside, as they do their blouses.

Of course, one could not be in that neighborhood on a Sunday without following the straggling numbers who seemed definitely going somewhere. I expected to be landed in a church, but found myself in the Temple—an incongruous name for that motley market where everything is sold, from potatoes to old armor. On the upper floor, while I stood watching an old fellow playing his fiddle as he squatted among his antique bronzes and brass candlesticks, I became aware of the fragrance of flowers somewhere near. A few feet away an old woman was

calling attention to a perfect garden of plants and blossoms. It was then I saw the lady first. She was buying white narcissus.

How can I describe to you just what she looked like and how she impressed me? It's pretty hard, for I realize that though I paint her portrait in words, you will not know just what a curious trick her lashes had, you cannot know her smile, nor why the way her hair grew round her ear should have made an *aura* creep over me from the mystery we call charm. So many women have hair like flaming Autumn leaves; so many have soft, dark eyes; so many have clear, white skins and red mouths. Ah, you can't see her at all, for her red hair was like mist on her brow, her white skin seemed to have been drenched in milk, and her mouth was like the "thread of scarlet" of which Solomon sings. The character of her face suggested Récamier in David's portrait of her—you recall how the chin goes into a sharp, piquant point?

She wore a drab homespun gown with a loose Norfolk jacket, and a black hat was bent back from her face. She was really indifferently dressed. I knew at once, however, that she was an American; when I heard her soft voice asking questions in imperfect French I was sure of it.

"An artist, I'll wager," said I, and followed her.

She carried the huge bunch of narcissus across her arms as a woman does a child and hurried to a place where two other girls were buying pewter steins.

"See here—only two francs. Won't

it be lovely in the Mexican bowl?" she asked, and smiled adorably.

Well, they walked away in the mist, and I followed them. But they went into the Madeleine for mass, carrying their packages. In the crush coming out I missed them. Though I stayed in Paris four months, and never forgot her face, I did not see her there again.

Do you remember last year when I went off for a mope in the very hey-day of Horse Show week and took unto myself Ned Moodey's house in Connecticut? You don't know Ned? Well, his house is a queer, tidy little place not unlike foresters' cottages in Scotland, with latticed windows, diamond panes and a roof with abrupt, triangular rises, eaves, and all that sort of thing. One of my inexplicable and sudden attacks of *ennui* had seized me; I had sickened of the society puppet show, yet was not quite in the mood for bolting off to Cairo or even to Hot Springs. I sent up my own horses, stacked Ned's house with some good bottles and cigars, sent up a ripping cook and heaps of books, and prepared for a good loaf, with Nature all about me in a tearful mood. You were in Japan, and only two fellows knew where to find me. Oh, I breathed big breaths the night I took possession, I can tell you, as I sat by the roaring fire and smoked, while the trees tapped on the windows. Free! I felt like a Crusoe, well housed and with every creature comfort—by Jove, how that man could cook a saddle of mutton!

I had been there about two weeks, and was returning late in the afternoon after a long ride. I found myself on a winding little path going down hill. It was a gray day; dead leaves were falling in a ghostly way; people were burning the leaves already fallen, and a permeating, sluggish smoke filled the air like a gruesome incense. In that haze, on that road, I saw her again, and the content of the Crusoe fled.

She was in dead black, a long cloak flapping backward; her hair was a bit of the Autumn red, gathered

under her hat. She carried a light walking-stick and occasionally laid it over her shoulder—I found out afterward she had a trick of doing that, and it was very *chic*.

I walked my horse past her and met her eyes. They were serious, rested on me a second, and looked past me. When the wider road was reached I ambled at a safe distance behind and saw her enter a plain little house, set back among a few trees, near the village; a solemn little place, with narrow piazza and plain door, which looked as if it had been built by a good Presbyterian early in the century. She went around it and entered at the back.

In a garden down the road a man was shoveling the leaves into heaps.

"I'm looking for a family named Jones," said I to him; "do they live in that house?" and I nodded to the one that interested me.

He told me who lived there—and harkee, Jack, as I prove to you the whimsies of Destiny. I have a good memory for names, and instantly I recalled that among the heap of letters left by Ned, should the desire to be neighborly seize me later, was one to the very people who lived in that house.

There was a husband. He was away, except at rare intervals. He traveled for a firm in a big town near by, selling woolens, I think—but it doesn't matter. He didn't matter, either; a quiet, good fellow who kept all the commandments, I verily believe, but who did not in his own person make the commandments attractive. He was always taking pepsin, and admitted a fondness for hot breads. He did not ride or shoot; he wondered at his wife liking long walks across country, and he had a fondness for the elder Dumas, Bulwer Lytton and ice cream. Don't fancy that he was bad-looking or unmanly. I dare say he had principles he'd go to the stake for—which is more than I have—a kind nature and average provincial intelligence. He was simply uninteresting. You wondered, of course, why she married him. Why

did she marry him? I often asked the stars that as I rode home, the spell of her mysterious eyes over me and commingling in memory with his strident good-night. Why *did* she marry him? She never seemed to belong to him.

He was a sort of remote cousin, and I fancy her mother, who had ailed for years and recently died, had favored the marriage to leave her daughter with a protector. She did not love him, and never had. That was positive. Yet he had come to be a part of her life, as a relative is. Habit is strong with women in this sense. Friendship is a passionate thing beside the lukewarm neighborliness that often results in a marriage whose most important note is the economy of co-operation in housekeeping.

I'll say no more of the husband. We saw each other seldom, and I don't believe he felt himself a loser by the fact.

What friends we became—she and I! She was lonely and young. Her days were passed in that prim village, but really her mind and soul were in Paris; and we talked of Paris and art as the twilight came in at the windows of the big front room.

It was a pretty room. She had made the most of its Colonial framework. Neither horsehair nor ugly reps furnished it. There were rugs and rush-seated chairs, and a log always burning in the old fireplace; there were battered copper and pewter vessels and old church vestments bought in the Rue Jean Jacques Rousseau or the Rue Béranger, scattered about, and her own unframed work—flower pieces in water colors or Brittany village scenes with a great deal of red in the roofs and a great deal of violet in the sky—on the buff-colored walls.

Her work was good of its dainty sort, and she had a market for it. She had a sketch of that very old woman with the narcissus in the Temple, and I insisted on purchasing it, without telling her why I wanted it so much.

By degrees I came to know the details of her life from childhood, and the

story of her family. On her father's side she was a French Huguenot; on her mother's, a Puritan. She had devotedly loved her mother, whose sweet, lined face, done by her in pastel, looked down from above the low chimney-piece. It had been difficult to get her mother's permission to study in Paris—for to her Paris was the modern Gomorrah—and during the girl's four years' residence there every steamer had brought her letters from the simple, austere, loving soul filled with terrified prayers to keep herself "unspotted from the world."

The mixture of French gaiety and New England definiteness of character made her a creature of surprises. She never disappointed me for a second. When I tied my horse at the gate and went in for the coffee or tea, sure to be ready in the afternoon, I was never quite sure how I should find her—saucy and disposed to flip-pant argument, or dreamy, or mischievous as a gamin, or thoughtful and inclined to puzzle over the meanings of life, or with the reckless hatred of the monotony of her existence filling her soft eyes with fire. Whatever her mood was, it seemed the most desirable. Ah, she was very lovely, Jack, very lovely, and I fell completely under the spell of her enchantment.

You know a bit of the devil is necessary as an ingredient of a woman's charm—at least, to a bachelor of forty-three—and she had that, too. We grew to be such chums I could talk of life, tell her bare truths about it, speak to her frankly of the experiences a man has. She knew I was not qualified for a saintship. I don't believe it turned her against me. The immaculate man never appealed, because he *was* immaculate, to a woman yet; she prefers the whitening process to begin after she has gathered him to herself.

She had an intellectual appreciation of deviltry. The French in her made her diagnose from curiosity what she held at arm's length. The fact that her neighbors began to notice our friendship and gossip of it

gave it a zest for her, I think. One day, after a long tramp over the country in the Autumn stillness, we stopped to rest on a fallen tree, and she took one of my cigarettes. She held it between her fingers like a glass lifted for a toast, with a droll twitch of her eyebrows and exaggerated wickedness in her slow, laughing glance.

"There is a piquancy in being rigidly respectable and seeming quite improper, don't you think?" she laughed.

She even came to the cottage and dined with me alone twice. I knew the secret was safe with my man, and perhaps because the risk was great the pleasure was great, too. I see her now in the hazy light above the low candles, in dead white, with white flowers in her hair. And such lovely hair! It grew on her head like a cap made of soft tangles—there seemed no precise arrangement of it.

Those dinners were perfect. We chummed it, that was all, though my heart felt boyish again with a new, nervous pain, and her eyes often said what her lips never hinted. She left early, carrying away what books of mine attracted her, and I took her home guardedly, on foot, by secluded paths.

There's a knowing little twist to your mouth, Jack. Believe me, you are wrong. This woman was like no other in my life. I never misunderstood her. The ground on which we met is not often the resting place of men and women, and I admit it is dangerous ground; it only shows at certain pauses of the tide; sooner or later the waters all around it creep over it, and if the man and the woman stand there they drown. One can only reach it and linger briefly, for the end is inevitable.

I had known her by this time almost four months, seeing her constantly and intimately, and during that time I never even told her of having followed her in Paris, I never touched her hand except as friendship permitted.

But I loved her and I knew she loved me.

When I say I loved her, you must not suppose I knew the reckless, self-effacing worship that I understood when I read the poets at college. I would not have died for her. Had she been free I'm sure I should have asked her to marry me, but only as an inevitable condition imposed by honor, for her sake. But, in a way, I was glad this was impossible. I knew I should love her as long as I lived, and to love her without feeling bound had its own reckless charm. I loved her selfishly. It is the only way a bachelor of forty-three who has done nothing with his life but tramp over the known world and study his fellow men—and women—can love. There's the pity of it.

Early in February I got a letter from Ned Moodey from Miami. He was taking three or four others on his yacht to Porto Rico and Cuba. He told me to shut up shop and come by the end of the week.

I sent off a letter to him, a wild, incoherent letter, I fancy, imploring him to ask this woman and her husband. I tried to play the hypocrite by harping on her loneliness in the dull village, and hinted that the trip would do the husband good. I can imagine how Ned roared inwardly. But he sent the invitation by telegraph. Of course, I had known the husband was away, to remain for six weeks.

That's how we came to go to Cuba together. During those days of breeze and blue sea, of short, flaming twilights and lunar brilliance, I grew to call her by her first name.

It was Pamela.

It hurts to talk of that time, Jack. It was so maddeningly sweet. Oh, the blue wonder of those Southern seas and skies! We don't know what deep, bewildering, vertiginous blue is like till we see the pillared palms against it. Who is it speaks of yachting in the South as "a dream between the blue and the blue?" So it is. How far away were the Connecticut village, the falling leaves, the sad skies! Here

nothing was *triste*. The world seemed a magical thing of light, perfume, starshine, of silence but for the trilling lap of waves, of warmth, of love. Those among us whose lives were bare of romance—men like Ned, I mean—even they felt some whisper from such nights which fretted their soulless content. Then what of Pamela and me? Between us a passionate silence hung, so unbearable that at times I was near madness.

We saw then how unsafe was that strip of land we had called good-fellowship, in the midst of the raging seas. The invincible waters were around us now, so there was scarcely a foot's space on which to stand. But we lingered still.

The yacht anchored in the Bay of Matanzas, and we lay off the old fort of San Severino for nearly a week. We were rowed every day to land, went on excursions of all sorts—to ex-Spanish prisons now United States hospitals, to churches, curio shops, pawnshops, rattled over the lumpy pavements of the town in variously broken *coches*, danced on the house-tops under the moon. It was not *life*, Jack—it was *romance* from dawn to sleeping time. I—even I—with this frost of hair on my worldly-wise forehead, found myself writing poetry about it all—poetry like this:

I'll long for the roof-top, low and brown,
Which the palms and starlight know,
The old world peace of the sleeping town
Where only the trade winds blow.
I'll see in fancy a *patio* white
Where a fountain lilts all day,
The screens of jasmine, where filtered
light
Makes flickerings on the spray.

Could I have done worse than this when I was twenty, at Harvard? Oh, the world was new, and I was young again.

On one of the loveliest of afternoons Pamela and I were rowed ashore with the others. We were all to make an excursion on the little Cuban ponies up to the Cumbra. This is the point of a mountain, with a famous view showing the meeting of the Yumuri

River and the sea on one hand, the wonderful valley of the Yumuri on the other.

How pretty Pamela looked in her habit! She wore a big Panama sombrero with black, gauzy stuff knotted about it, and the big brim threw a fascinating shadow over her eyes.

The roads up the mountain are rough. Only these little ponies, sure-footed as chamois, and with a dainty, tripping gait, can carry you safely. Pamela and I rode together. The others were ahead. We rode slowly, the rest rapidly, for the Cumbra must be reached before sunset or the quick night would meet them coming down. As a result of our loitering we found ourselves at last alone in the mountain silence, where two roads crossed, with no sound of voices coming back to tell us which to take. Hallooing brought no answer from our companions, and after consultation, we decided it would be safest to give up the view and wait at the perplexing crossroads till our friends returned.

We tied the ponies and strolled to the right till we came on a villa set in a big garden behind high, rusted palings. The silence was as absolute there as on the mountain road. It was, in fact, a desecrated *casa*, roofless, deserted by every living thing. I opened the unlocked gates for Pamela, and we entered the garden.

The poetry and sadness of it, Jack, cannot be conveyed in words of mine. Broken statues gleamed like nude, dismembered bodies among the tangled foliage; queer, blood-red flowers of heady perfume dotted tangled vines and wound like creeping, living things across the weed-covered paths; a solitary bird called and called in this grievous stillness as if its insistence would bring faces to those charred and open windows, footsteps to the silent galleries; down in the valley somewhere nuns were singing an evening hymn, and the melody was punctuated by the silver beat of a vesper bell. The pathos of Cuba gripped us—Cuba, sumptuous beauty, sitting in rags among the cinders of her homes.

I can't make it plain to you, Jack, just how I came to kiss Pamela there, but I did. My arms were about her, and she leaned against me, sobbing like a hurt child. I remember it all as if through the fumes of some spiritual narcotic. The sweetness, the sadness, the silence were heart-breaking, and I think we suddenly realized that love is always tragic.

The west flamed and deepened to copper, and the eerie tropical twilight came in strides across the heavens. That hour is apart from all others in my life. To think of it to-night, to remember her words, the touch of her lips, the perfume of her hair—ah, to remember!

She loved me as recklessly, as deeply as I loved her. We were to surrender everything for each other. My future was to be hers; hers, mine.

The patter of the returning ponies was a reminder of a world we had forgotten.

At the gateway Pamela looked back through the blue shadows over the deserted garden to the ruined home.

"I wish, somehow, you had not told me here," she said, with a shiver; "I think I'd have died if you had gone out of my life without saying what you have to-day. But I am sad. Is it an omen?"

Wild March weather was holding dreary carnival when we returned to Connecticut and to our separate homes. I did not visit Pamela, as formerly. I was circumspect. Besides, it was easy to bear the separation, we were so soon to be together forever. I had definitely sketched our future as the yacht steamed homeward "from lands of sun to lands of snow," and she had agreed to everything.

The Scotch people who had rented my house in Florence had given it up about six months before. Old Bianca, who had been my nurse, and her son occupied it as caretakers. I was to write her to have it in readiness for us by the middle of April. I engaged passage on one of the steamers leaving by the southern route for Genoa. We were to leave Connecticut for New York on different days, stay at differ-

ent places and go aboard ship under assumed names. When the measureless seas divided the present from the past our life together was to begin.

It was a beautiful dream, Jack—Florentine art, Summer skies and love, eternal love!

There were to be no secret hours together. We were to brush everything away before the world's eyes and openly depend for happiness on each other. The world calls this sin. It is glorious gambling. How much is risked! The little ball of fate whirls madly round the wheel of chance—it may rattle eventually into the niche marked Happiness, and rest there, or maybe into the one marked Despair; but the very impetus with which it is flung saves it from the niche marked Boredom. Isn't it so?

The husband came back for a week. I was sorry he did so, for I knew the deception she must practice hurt Pamela. The man depended on her, needed her care and gentleness, and she had for him the instinct of protection which is a fraction of the mother in every woman. In keeping up appearances I was even asked in to a Sunday evening tea.

Pamela's face thrilled me, frightened me, too. She had awakened to an electric beauty. Her white cheeks held a flame that came and went; her eyes were a bit sunken and had an unhealthy brilliance; her hand, when I touched it, burned and trembled. She seemed possessed of a devil of restlessness, laughed with a new gaiety, went from one thing to another inconsequently.

"Pamela is not well," said the husband to me, with heavy anxiety, as he buttered a hot biscuit. "She doesn't sleep at all. She screamed in her sleep last night and clutched me. She thought she was falling. She ought to see a doctor. See how thin her face is! Advise her to see a doctor; she won't believe me when I say she needs one."

Pamela flung back her head and laughed a little wildly.

"Oh, nonsense, Hal! It's simply the artistic temperament, my dear. I

always told you artists were a bit mad. Soon you'll believe it," and she laughed again.

She disturbed me. She was not like herself.

I managed to say a few words to her before leaving.

"Are you ill?" I asked.

"No; it's the strain—the strain," she muttered, piteously.

"You have no regret?"

"No!" she said, her eyes alight with a defiant happiness.

The husband went away again.

Before leaving the cottage I sent Pamela a last letter of instructions, and placed it in a big basket of hyacinths that had just been forced into bloom in Ned's hothouse. I left for New York last Monday. She was to follow on Wednesday. We were to sail next Saturday.

How shall I tell you the rest? I feel stunned still. Wait—I'll read you the letter. It reached me the day I expected her:

It's no use, Alec, I cannot go. This is no whim, neither is it cowardice or lack of love; but—I cannot go. Oh, how I have suffered! how I have tried to kill something within me which has torn me in holding me back—and dear, dear, how I love you! When you go away, Alec, I feel I shall die; and yet I've come to see I'd rather die here in this stagnation than go with you!

I'll try to tell you about myself. Ever since we returned from the yacht the thing we had planned to do became like a poison—a scourge. In Cuba nothing seemed to matter but love. It was the same as we skimmed over the blue sea. But in this house—oh, it has been different here! Memories of my childhood, my mother's teachings, a pity for my husband, have tortured me. Instead of being sublime, the gratification of my love for you seemed cruel, selfish, wrong. This is what it means to be born a Puritan.

Oh, Alec, I was struggling this way, trying to crucify these inborn monitors, when the basket of hyacinths came from you. They were my mother's favorite flowers. They framed her dear face in the coffin. A few of them, faded, are put away with a lock of her hair. I shut myself into a dark room with these flow-

ers and felt her with me again. In fact, Alec, I fainted there with my face upon them.

Afterward I knew I could not go. Nothing could change me now. I love you and I long for you; but it is as if you were dead and could not be with me. Don't try to see me—not because I fear you could persuade me, but because of the pain to us both. Good-bye, my dear, my love; good-bye.

Of course I went back to see her. On the train I planned arguments and pleadings to move a stone. I would carry her off her feet, sweep her away by the very hunger and force of my love. Oh, she could not resist! I never dreamed of failure! I was desperate, and I felt the will power of a giant.

When I saw her face I couldn't say a word. I was seized and overwhelmed with despair. I knew there were no prayers coined by the deepest love, the direst need, which could move her. In her sunken eyes there was the look I had seen only once on a human face—it was the ghastly hunger, but eternal renunciation of joy, that had flamed under the bony brows of a Siberian convict as the last transfer to the mines was made—and in this look, Jack, there was a decision that was immutable, and I knew that every Puritan ancestor she had was there in spirit, backing her up.

Good people will say she was "a brand snatched from the burning." According to our curious morality it was right for her to stay with the dull, unoffending husband she did not love; it was wrong to go to Florence with me. I cannot think so. At any rate, I did not love her unselfishly enough to save her from myself. You see, I was vain enough to think I could make her happy—I forgot that the Puritan in one never dies.

There, the dawn has found us. You are haggard, Jack, and the fire's out. I am old and cold. My plans, old man? Oh, I shall leave on Saturday, just the same. No, not for Florence—for Monte Carlo.